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SUBJECT: TOP JESUIT: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM UNDER PRESSURE IN INDIA

1. (SBU) DURING A MARCH 31 MEETING WITH THE AMBASSADOR, SOCIETY OF JESUS (JESUIT) SUPERIOR GENERAL HANS-PETER KOLVENBACH EXPRESSED HIS MOUNTING CONCERN ABOUT RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS IN INDIA. KOLVENBACH, WHO RECENTLY RETURNED FROM A TRIP TO INDIA, SAID THAT HINDU FUNDAMENTALISM SEEMED TO BE ON THE RISE IN THE COUNTRY. IN SOME PROVINCES, HE NOTED, POLICE PERMISSION WAS REQUIRED TO BAPTIZE NEW CHRISTIANS. ALTHOUGH THE INDIAN CONSTITUTION HAD DECLARED SUCH PROVISIONS UNCONSTITUTIONAL, LOCAL JURISDICTIONS SOMETIMES CONTINUE TO ABIDE BY OLD POLICIES.

2. (SBU) LAW AND CUSTOM ALSO DISCRIMINATED AGAINST CHRISTIAN CONVERTS, ACCORDING TO KOLVENBACH. IN SOME SITUATIONS, CONVERTS FACE THE LOSS OF SOCIAL STATUS AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY FOLLOWING THEIR CONVERSION. KOLVENBACH CHARACTERIZED THE TREATMENT OF CHRISTIANS IN INDIA AS HARASSMENT RATHER THAN PERSECUTION, BUT HE POINTED OUT THAT AT LEAST TWO JESUITS HAD BEEN KILLED IN INDIA IN THE LAST FEW YEARS IN WHAT APPEARED TO BE RELIGIOUSLY MOTIVATED ATTACKS.

3. (SBU) THE JESUITS ARE GENERALLY WELL RESPECTED IN INDIA, KOLVENBACH SAID, DUE TO THEIR SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES, BUT THEIR PRIESTS ARE INCREASINGLY KEPT AT ARM'S LENGTH BY THOSE HOSTILE TO "WESTERN" INFLUENCES AND BY OTHERS WHO ARE CONCERNED WITH PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF THESE CONNECTIONS. HE SAID THAT THE COMMON ATTITUDE FROM GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS IS THAT CHRISTIANS ARE "WELCOME" IN INDIA, BUT MUST UNDERSTAND THE DYNAMICS OF INDIAN SOCIETY: WITH LITTLE TO HOLD THE WIDELY DIVERSE COUNTRY TOGETHER BESIDES RELIGION, HINDUISM IS INCREASINGLY SEEN AS THE MOST IMPORTANT FONT OF NATIONAL UNITY AND ONE THAT POLITICAL LEADERS -- PARTICULARLY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL -- ARE LOATH TO SEE DILUTED.

NICHOLSON

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